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Accepted, Rejected, or Wait Listed? How to Make Your Final Decision

By Elizabeth LaScala, Ph.D.

Now that it is spring time, the letters you've been waiting for are finally coming in the mail. It's time for you to make your decisions. So, let's put the admissions news in perspective.

Rejected?

Rejection is always difficult to take. Parents can be more upset by a "letter of denial" than their children. Students and parents should realize that rejection from a particular school is not an indication of worth or ability. Colleges have many reasons for turning down applicants. Schools must address their own needs for an entering freshman class-factors like legacy, diversity, sports, and space in specific degree programs all play a role. There is also some randomness to the process.

Wait Listed?

Colleges build wait lists because not every admitted student decides to attend. Colleges wait until after the May 1 deadline to see how many students send in deposits. This process is similar to the way airlines fill their planes! If too many students accept admission, the result can be anything from increasing the number of freshmen in each dorm to converting student lounges into bedrooms or using hotels for housing. Some students get wait listed and, sometimes, accepted later or bounced off the plane!

There is a recent trend toward longer wait lists. The depressed economy could make this trend stronger. Private schools are worried that fewer students than usual will decide to attend. There are many different and conflicting factors at play. The pool of high school graduates is slightly smaller this year than last. Yet in bad economic times, more people attend college, particularly public colleges, rather than search for jobs. With so many factors involved, what should you do if offered a place on a wait list?

First, remember that acceptance from a wait list, especially at selective colleges, is a long shot. Don't let a wait list spoil your excitement about getting ready for college. Closure feels better than emotional limbo. Next, send a deposit to one of the colleges where you have been accepted outright by the May 1 reply deadline. Then check with undergraduate admissions at the school that offered the wait list option, and get the specifics. If the wait list is ranked, ask about your status. This is also a good time to ask about conditions attached to being wait listed-for example how does it affect priority housing or financial aid options? If you decide to remain on the list, it is wise to speak to your high school counselor. Your counselor can help your cause by contacting the school to convey support for you and your enthusiasm for attending. A letter from you expressing your interest and any new accomplishments is also important.

Accepted?

Many students get into more than one school. No matter how carefully you ordered the schools, there is often uncertainty about which to choose. Going far from home may become less desirable as senior year draws to a close. A large university may become more attractive than a small liberal arts college, if it invites you to join the honors program. To decide, review your original criteria for college selection. Then revisit your top choices, including the wait list option. Explore the campus, visit classrooms, have lunch in the cafeteria-try to get a sense of the real life of the school. Also, carefully consider the various financial aid awards. Check

The College Board's Compare Your Aid Awards at www.collegeboard.com. This tool also offers an array of financing options.

Be sure to ask each school these important questions about financial aid:

1. What are the projected tuition and fee increases for the next four years?

Compare this to increases during the past four years.

2. How does the college determine financial need?

3. Is institutional aid renewable? Does aid adjust if family circumstances change?

4. How do you treat outside scholarship awards? Do you reduce loan amounts or grants by the amount of the award? What is reduced first?

5. What is the average four year graduation rate? (Six year rates are typically reported, but the school should be able to provide a four year rate.)

6. What are the principal reasons students don't graduate in four years?

7. What is the average loan indebtedness of your students at graduation?

8. How do you help students prepare for careers (through the college years) and find employment as graduation nears?

Remember Your Manners

When the acceptance letter goes in the mail, other colleges that accepted you should get a brief thank you note declining the invitation to attend. And now you are truly on the road to college.

Elizabeth LaScala, Ph.D. is a certified college advisor who lives and works in Lafayette. Dr. LaScala draws on 22 years of higher education experience to help guide and support the college admissions process for students and their families. She has 3 children-one a graduate of Cal Poly (San Luis Obispo), one a sophomore at MIT and the youngest, a junior in high school. Dr. LaScala is a member of NACAC, WACAC and HECA. She can be contacted at (925) 891-4491 or elizabeth@doingcollege.com.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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